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ABSTRACT

This study examined how a group of 20 Chicana high school seniors made decisions about college. The majority of Chicanas in this study noted that they are not able to rely on their parents as information sources given their parents' lack of familiarity with the college choice process. As a result, these students were not able to receive information from their parents that could have assisted them in their decisions about college. Consequently, these students viewed the school as their primary source to access college-related information. Data from one-on-one interviews suggest that for Chicanas, being able to navigate successfully through the process of college decision making and planning may be a great feat given the structure of opportunities that are available within the school setting. (Contains 36 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Making Decisions About College: Understanding the Information Sources of Chicana Students

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Abstract

This study examined how a group of 20 Chicana high school seniors made decisions about college. The majority of the Chicanas in this study noted that they are not able to rely on their parents as information sources given their parents' lack of familiarity with the college choice process. As a result, these students were not able to receive from their parents, pieces of information that could have assisted them in their decisions about college. Consequently, these students viewed the school as their primary source to access college-related information. Data from one-on-one interviews suggests, however, that for Chicanas, being able to successfully navigate through the process of college decision-making and planning may be a greater feat given the structure of opportunities that are available within the school setting.

Making Decisions About College:
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I'm not sure if one ever feels that their decision to attend a specific college is ever the best choice she or he could have made. However, I would argue that successfully navigating through the college choice process requires that a student searches for, has access to, and taps into resources that will inform her about the best post-secondary opportunities available to her. For Students of Color in general and the Chicana[1] students in this study in particular, being able to successfully navigate through the process of college decision-making and planning may be a greater feat given that large percentages of these students tend to be concentrated in low-resource, poorly funded high schools. An analyses of the college choice process within these types of contextual settings, helps us understand how the resources available to Chicanas at their schools defines and delimits the types of college choices these students are able to make.

For Chicanas, many of whom are first-generation students, access to tangible college related resources and opportunities within the school setting becomes crucial. The fact that many of these students are the first in their families with the opportunity to attend college, the information and resources necessary to make decisions about college may not necessarily be available to them within the home environment. This is not because parents are not willing to provide their children with this type of information, but rather, are often times limited in what they could share with their children given their limited exposure to the educational system and opportunities in this country. Not being able to fully access college related information within the school setting, then, can make the process of planning and deciding for college a very uncertain and stressful process for Chicanas.

Despite the growing number of college choice studies, yet to emerge is a substantial body of research that attempts to conceptualize this process specifically for first-generation Chicana students. This paper represents one attempt to understand the college choice process of Chicana students. More specifically, this paper examines the different types of information sources that are available to this group of students, and explores how access to important college resources and opportunities influences the post-secondary plans of first-generation Chicanas.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This section attempts to shed light on some of the relevant research and theory related to student college choice, and specifically, Chicana college choice. First, I present a brief overview of the conceptual frameworks offered by college choice studies for understanding the college decision-making process. Secondly, I present a review of the literature on the influence that various individuals such as parents and school personnel have on the college aspirations of students. Finally, I introduce a social capital framework as a way of conceptualizing the role of institutional agents such as parents, teachers, and counselors as sources of information, in providing crucial college related resources and opportunities to Chicana students.

College Choice Frameworks

Literature on college choice contends that the decision of students to continue their education at the post secondary level is impacted by a number of factors. Some of these include student ability; parental educational levels, expectation, and encouragement; encouragement from high school teachers and counselors; race/ethnicity; socioeconomic status; and gender

[1] For the purpose of this study, a Chicana is defined as a student of Mexican origin living in the United States.

(Trent, 1970; Hearn, 1991; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Sharp, 1996). Efforts to understand how these factors impact students' college choices have led various researchers to develop models that attempt to explain the stages in students' college decision-making process (Chapman, 1981; Jackson, 1982; Litten, 1982; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler, & Gallagher, 1987). The prevailing model amongst these researchers identifies three stages of college choice; predisposition, search, and choice.

Clearly, these models have been helpful in allowing us to conceptualize the decision to attend college as a complicated and lengthy process of post-secondary opportunities that eventually help a student narrow her or his choice of a particular college. College choice studies have also helped us think about different types of influences that students must negotiate as they attempt to make decisions about their college opportunities. Given the dearth of literature on Chicana college choice, one important aspect of this process that needs to be examined in greater detail is the different types of information sources that are available to Chicanas as they make decisions about college. I now turn to this line of research in order to examine the influence of different types of information sources on the college choice process. I begin with an examination of the role of parents.

Influence of Parents

The positive influence parents have on the development of their children's educational goals has been well documented. In fact, parental encouragement has been found to be positively correlated with post secondary educational plans (Conklin & Daily, 1981; Ekstrom, 1985; Hossler and Stage, 1992). Within the college choice literature, parental encouragement has been

found to be most important during the predisposition phase (Hossler & Stage, 1992), suggesting that parents play a vital role in shaping their children's initial thoughts about college.

While parental influence is important throughout the college choice process (Galotti & Mark, 1994; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989), their influence becomes less apparent in the latter phases. This is because during the search and choice phases, when students are selecting and choosing their schools, other sources such as peers, teachers, and counselors, tend to replace parents and other family members as the key source of influence (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999).

Very little of this line of work has made the effort to understand how the encouragement and support offered by Mexican-American parents impacts the college choice process of Chicana students. In fact, what has prevailed in some of the literature on parental influence is the work of several cultural deficit theorists (i.e. Sowell, 1981; Dunn, 1987), who have fueled the misperception that the encouragement and support instilled by Mexican-American parents has detrimental consequences on the educational aspirations of their children. Contrary to this belief, however, a number of studies have demonstrated that Mexican-American parents do in fact play a significant role in the development of their children's educational aspirations (Ovando, 1977; Gandara, 1995; Perez, 1999). Because college choice studies have focused minimally on the experiences of Chicana students, what we are able to say about the role Mexican-American parents play in the college choice process of their daughters, is in large part anecdotal.

Given their often-marginalized educational and occupational conditions, the type of informational support that Mexican-American parents are able to transmit to their children is greatly hindered. Despite many of the barriers experienced by Mexican-American parents (i.e. limited access to educational, occupational, and economic opportunities), one study found that

Chicanas sighted their parents as an important positive influence during the college choice experience (Talavera-Bustillos, 1998). Needless to say, there is still more to be learned about the role Mexican-American parents play in their daughter's college choice process. For example, to what extent are parents, given their educational and occupational experiences, able to act as important information sources for their children? Furthermore, if students are not able to garner the information necessary to successfully navigate through the college choice process from their parents, where do these students turn for this type of information? For Students of Color in general, including first-generation Chicanas, schools often times represent the only setting where they are able to access college-related information and resources. What follows now is an examination of the school context and its role in structuring opportunity.

School Effects

The type of school one attends can have important effects on different aspects of a student's educational experience. For example, the amount of resources and college related opportunities available within the school environment could limit or expand the post-secondary opportunities a student perceives to be available to her. For instance, schools with a greater abundance of resources and opportunities are more likely to facilitate the development of a positive college going culture than schools with limited resources and opportunities. In fact studies have found consistent correlations between the socioeconomic composition of the school and student academic success (Hanushek, 1989), as well as with the achievement aspirations of the graduating seniors (Levine, Mitchell, & Havighurst, 1970; Jencks & Mayers, 1990).

When students are not able to access important college information at home, many turn to their schools to obtain these types of resources. Schools, however, are not always able or

equipped to provide students with access to important college related resources and opportunities. A considerable amount of evidence, for instance, indicates that a large proportion of Chicana students attend segregated schools; are under-enrolled in college preparatory courses; face negative disparate effects of high-stake testing; and drop out from high school at alarming rates (Valencia, 1991; Ronda and Valencia, 1994). Furthermore, certain organizational practices such as tracking, insufficient efforts to involve parents in the school community, and attendance at overcrowded schools, seriously compromise the educational processes of a large percentage of Chicana students (Cuadraz, 1992; Carter and Segura, 1979; Olivas, 1986; Keller, Deneen, and Magallan, 1991; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Perez, 1999). The organizational structure of a school that is plagued by such factors as those alluded to can make it difficult for students to obtain the necessary resources and institutional support to plan and make decisions about college.

Influence of Teachers and Counselors

The types of encounters and interactions Chicanas have with key individuals within the school setting, such as teachers and counselors, also have the potential to impact the post-secondary opportunities envisioned by students. Research generally agrees, for example, that teachers and counselors have a certain degree of influence on students' decision to attend college (Ekstrom, 1985; Lewis & Morrison, 1975; Alva, 1995; McDonough, 1997). In fact, most students who plan to apply to college normally rely on high school counselors for college guidance (McDonough, 1997). Furthermore it is suggested that the presence of counselors and a strong college bound ethic play important roles in influencing the college decisions of high school students (Falsey & Heyns, 1984).

The fact that Mexican-American parents often times find it difficult to access pertinent college related information from schools (Perez, 1999), or lack a formal understanding of their child's college choice process, makes Chicana students' reliance on school personnel that much more critical. Research on Chicanas, however, has found that most of these students lack career guidance and pertinent information about college preparation (Matute-Bianchi, 1991). This is not necessarily surprising, given that Chicanas are more likely to experience a greater degree of inadequate counseling encounters, and be more likely to be concentrated in poorly funded, overcrowded schools with high student to counselor ratios (Fitzsimmons, 1991). Clearly, the types of schools that Chicanas are enrolled in, coupled with the quality of interactions they have with key individuals within the school setting, will have important ramifications on the types of college opportunities they perceive to be available to them.

Social Capital, Institutional Agents, and College Choice

An important way to conceptualize the information sources available to Chicanas both within the home and school settings, is in terms of social capital. Social capital refers to instrumental or supportive relationships that an individual (or group of individuals) may have to resources or "social networks" that provide access to opportunity (Coleman, 1988; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Stanton-Salazar identified two types of social networks that have an impact on students' access to social capital – institutional agents (e.g., teachers or counselors) and protective agents (e.g., family members or community networks).

In a social capital framework, college information and knowledge can be viewed as a "mobility-related resource" (Stanton-Salazar, 1997), as it reflects information, knowledge, and opportunities that are presumed to have promising benefits for students' future success and

mobility. For many students, schools are one of few institutional settings where access to mobility related resources such as college information are possible. Using a social capital framework, institutional agents such as parents, peers, teachers, and counselors can be conceived as, "those individuals who have the capacity and commitment to transmit directly, or negotiate the transmission of, institutional resources and opportunities" (Stanton-Salazar, 1998, p.6). Thus, for Chicanas, the college resources found at schools become and important supplement to the positive support and resources they are able to garner from their parents within the home environment.

In a study of college choice, a social capital framework grants us the opportunity to examine how protective agents such as parents, and institutional agents, such as peers, teachers, and counselors, assist students in their efforts to pursue a college education. Moreover, a social capital framework gives us the conceptual tools to understand how institutional settings such as schools, provide access to, and facilitate the development of social networks that can help guide students through the college choice process.

IMPORTANCE OF STUDY

Several reasons make an examination of Chicana college choice important. First, from a scholarly perspective, literature on college choice has not done a particularly good job of describing the college choice experiences of Chicana students. Given the lack of research on the college choice process of Chicanas, we do not know a great deal about some of the important factors shaping the college opportunities available to this population of students. For example, we know that parents are capable of playing a critical role throughout their children's college choice process (Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper, 1999). However, given the social, economic, and

educationally marginal conditions of a large number of Mexican-American parents (Gonzalez, 1998), we do not know much about the degree to which these parents can act as information sources in the complicated process of college decision-making.

Second, college choice studies that have attempted to understand the college choice process of different groups of ethnic and racial minorities, have typically invoked quantitative methods on large data sets of students (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987). As a result, these studies have only been able to draw general conclusions about the key influences affecting the decision-making process of ethnic and racial minorities. From a research design perspective, then, this qualitative examination of the college choice process of Chicanas is important because it offers an in depth examination of the college decision-making experience of one ethnic population. Although qualitative methods have been incorporated in recent studies with the intent of understanding how specific factors influence individual groups of students (McDonough, 1997; Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper, 1999), these studies too, have focused minimally on the experience of Chicanas.

Third, this study is important because it makes an effort to introduce a new conceptual model by which to examine and understand students' college choice experiences. Incorporating a social capital framework gives us the opportunity to focus on key individuals such as parents, peers, and school personnel and their role as institutional agents in the college choice process of Chicanas. In doing so, we are able to understand the extent to which these different sources of information, and the college related resources they are able to provide, impact students' perceptions of the types of post-secondary opportunities available to them.

Finally, at least two things make it crucial from both a practical and policy perspective to understand how students from different backgrounds, in this case Chicanas, make decisions

about college. For one, the college going population is becoming increasingly diverse, and thus a need to understand how different populations of students come to understand and plan for college is important. Secondly, because students of color continue to be under-represented in institutions of higher education, and understanding of the college choice process can alert us of the various factors and influences and facilitate matriculation into post-secondary institutions.

OBJECTIVES

Given the lack of research on the college choice process of Chicanas, we do not know a great deal about some of the important factors shaping the college choice opportunities envisioned by this population of students. Consequently, this study has two objectives. First, this study examines the degree to which Chicanas perceive their parents to be familiar with the college choice experience, and the implications this familiarity or lack thereof has for Chicanas who are making decisions about college. By examining how parents' familiarity with the college choice process influences the experiences of Chicanas, this study is able to examine the different sources of information that are available to these students outside of their home environment.

Consequently, the second objective of this study is to explore the different sources of information available to Chicanas as they attempt to navigate through the college choice process. In this section I explore the interactions Chicanas have with key individuals situated both in and out of the school setting. In doing so, I examine the degree to which the college opportunities envisioned by Chicanas are influenced by the information they are able to attain from various institutional agents.

The following are the questions guiding this study:

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1) What types of information sources are available to Chicanas as they navigate through the college choice process?

2) To what extent are protective agents such as parents and other family members able to serve as information sources for Chicana students?

3) What role do institutional agents such as counselors play in the college choice process of Chicanas?

METHODS

Consistent with the directives stated by Merriam (1988) and Creswell (1994) for planning a qualitative research project, this study attempts to uncover the experiences of first-generation Chicana high school seniors as they made decisions about college. I tried to accomplish this by obtaining their perspectives on their college choice process, and the information sources most influential in shaping their decisions. Consequently, a qualitative research study design will be employed because of its goals to provide a holistic description and analysis of a specific process as experienced by a particular sub-population of students (Merriam, 1988).

In order to obtain information on the college choice process of first-generation Chicanas, this study examines how a group of Chicana high school seniors make decisions about college. I analyze their individual and collective educational experiences in order to understand the different factors that are influential in their college choice process. The identification of key factors in their college choice process allows us to understand how Chicanas deal with and negotiate the different sources of influences that are salient in shaping their plans for a post-secondary education.

Sample

This study focuses on twenty first-generation Chicana seniors enrolled at a large urban high school in the greater Los Angeles area. The guiding concern in the selection of participants was to ensure that students from comparable personal and academic backgrounds were invited to participate in this study. For the purpose of this study, a Chicana is defined as a female student of Mexican origin living in the United States. Moreover, the term first-generation students is accorded to students "whose parents' highest level of education is a high school diploma or less" (NCES, 1998). Finally, the Chicanas in this study had a grade point average of ranging from a 2.5 to a 4.0 at the time of their selection.

Site Description

All the participants were seniors at El Este High School (pseudonym) during the time the study was conducted. El Este High School in Los Angeles has one of the biggest student body populations in the United States. From 1983 to 1991, El Este enrolled an average student body population of 3,818. After it became a multi-track high school in 1991, El Este has consistently enrolled over 5,000 students during each academic year. The student population at El Este reflects a very homogenous group. In 1996-97 for example, El Este had the following ethnic distribution: 98.8% Latino, and a combined 1.2% comprised of Native American, African American, Asian, White, Filipino, American Indian, and Pacific Islander. The general area served by El Este High School represents for the most part a low socioeconomic community. Consequently, the majority of the students attending the high school come from marginalized socioeconomic backgrounds.

While the college going rate at El Este High School may not appear low, the types of colleges that students from this high school attend, tell a different story. Take for example, the college destinations of the 1996 graduating senior class. About half of the graduating seniors, approximately 49 percent, matriculated into the local community college immediately after high school. The second largest group of college-bound seniors had plans to attend a California State University, roughly 34 percent. Only eight percent of the graduating seniors decided to attend the University of California and three percent transitioned into a private four-year school. While the majority of El Este seniors are managing to make their way into institutions of higher education, they have a tendency to matriculate into less selective institutions at a much higher rate than they do into more selective colleges or universities. The consequences of attending less selective institutions are evident in literature that suggests that students who begin their college careers at two year colleges and less likely than their counterparts at four year colleges to persist to graduation (Astin, 1982).

This site is of particular interest to the current study because of the ethnic composition of the school's student population. Already noted, roughly ninety-eight percent of the students attending this school are Latinas/os, of whom Mexican Americans constitute the largest percentage. Moreover, the majority of students are first-generation from families where neither parent has experienced any significant degree of formal education in the US. Furthermore, this is a school with the second largest student populations in the country, yet there is only one college counselor responsible for disseminating college-relevant information to all the students. The ratio of students to college counselor at this school is indicative of one of the many challenges facing Chicanas at this school in their efforts to access pertinent college-related information.

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Data Collection and Procedures

The primary method of data collection in this study is one on one semi-structured in depth interviews. In depth interviews allow the researcher to understand in considerable detail how individuals think and how they came to develop the perspective they hold (Bogdan and Bilken, 1998). Because very little is known about the college choice process of first-generation Chicanas and the factors that play an important role in it, it is imperative for this study to capture in as much detail, the key influences shaping student' decisions about college. One on one in depth interviews allow for that.

The Chicanas in this study were interviewed during the fall semester of their senior year. At the time of the interviews, these students were in the process of finalizing all of their college search activities and were preparing to submit their college applications. This sample was also interviewed a second time at the end of their senior year and will be interviewed six months after their high school graduation. However, for the purpose of this paper, only data from the first and second set of interviews are analyzed and presented.

FINDINGS

The results that follow are divided into three sections. First, I discuss the role that parents play in the college choice process. Here I examine the extent to which parents, as protective agents are able to fulfill the role of information sources for their daughters. More specifically, I focus on the familiarity Chicanas perceive their parents have with the college choice process, and the impact this has on their ability to successfully navigate through the process. I then focus on the school setting, and share students' perceptions of their school and the availability of college-related resources and opportunities that exist there. Within this analysis, I focus on the role that

institutional agents, particularly the role that the college counselor plays in transmitting vital college resources and opportunities. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the implications that Chicana students' access to resources have on their college choice process.

Protective Agents as Sources of Information in the College Choice Process

The important role that parents play during the college choice process has been well-documented (Hossler, Vesper, & Schmit, 1998). Without a doubt, protective agents such as parents have the capacity to play an integral part in shaping their children's college aspirations and choices. However, the type of information and college-related support parents are able to transmit is significantly facilitated or in many cases limited, by parents' own educational experiences. Many students, particularly those with college educated parents, are afforded the luxury of having protective agents in their parents, who can personalize the college choice process for them. Students with these types of familial resources are able to garner from their parents, key pieces of information about what the college decision-making process entails. These students for example, can learn from their parents whether or not a large public insitution might be preferable to a small private liberal arts institution, or whether or not living in the dorms the first year might be more suitable than having to commute.

As we will learn, the Chicana students in this study have cannot reap the benefits that come from having college educated parents who can act as important information sources. In fact, of the twenty Chicanas in this study, only four come from families where at least one parent had any exposure to the educational system in this country. The parents of the remaining Chicanas all attended school in Mexico where they averaged just about an elementary education.

The Chicanas themselves also varied with respects to their academic records. They included students who were very confident about their college aspirations and who had solid academic records, to students who were uncertain about their post-secondary plans and whose academic records were not necessarily impressive. Despite the lack of education experienced by their parents, all the Chicanas in this study indicated that their parents held a really strong value towards the importance of attaining an education.

Conversations with these students revealed, however, that despite the fact that all their parents held a high value towards the importance of an education, the role that their parents were able to play during the college choice process was greatly limited. Not having had the opportunity to experience the college choice process themselves, all of the Chicana students noted that their parents did not understand, and in many cases, were completely unfamiliar with the different aspects that their children's college choice process engendered. This theme was true for all Chicanas, regardless of their academic achievement and despite the fact that some of these students had older siblings already in college. For example, a Chicana whose academic records placed her in the top one percent of her class, talked about her mom's lack of familiarity with the college choice process:

> She's not that familiar with [it]. I've taken the SAT like a million times and she [asks], "Again, the SAT?" And then I'm going to apply to this school and that school and she [asks], "Why so many?" She doesn't really see what I'm trying to do, you know, trying to get into as many colleges as I can, and then choose from there and have a big range. She doesn't really understand all the work that goes into the application process."

The lack of understanding of the college choice process that is evident in the above quote must not be confused with a lack of support on the part of the mom. In fact, this same student noted

that despite her mom not understanding her efforts to expand her college choices by applying to as many schools as possible, this student made it clear that her mom was nevertheless supportive of her approach. For example this Chicana continued by noting:

> All she tells us is just to pick a good school somewhere, [to] pick the best one.

Because of their parents' lack of familiarity with the college choice process, there was a general expectation among most Chicanas that it was their responsibility to inform their parents about the process. This sentiment was held particularly by Chicanas who had younger siblings, with the hopes that their efforts to inform their parents would provide their parents with the knowledge to help their younger siblings once they were ready to pursue a college education. This is clear in the following quote:

> I don't think they were as familiar, but I think they are a lot more familiar because I try to get my parents involved. I try to explain to them everything. Like right now I have to fill in application for college. I try to tell them what they are for. I try to get them a little bit more familiar with what I'm doing...They weren't as familiar when [my older sister was applying], because she was the first to go to college. Probably they are more familiar now, and they are going to be more familiar when my other sister goes.

Even when older siblings had experienced the college choice process, this did not assure that parents would understand all of the complexities that were involved in applying to college. So even when older siblings had continued onto college, the fact that the parents themselves had not gone through the experience, was perhaps the most important reason for their inability to provide their children with key pieces of information. Take for instance, the story shared by the following Chicana:

> I don't think they are very familiar with it. I've had three older siblings go before me and [my parents] know part of it, but they don't know the whole process like taking test and filling out this and filling out that. They know to a certain extent but it's like they never did it, so they don't know. You can't know everything unless you've tried it before.

Because the parents of all the Chicanas in this study did not have a college background, the existence of a college going tradition via older siblings cannot be discounted. Having older siblings go before you helps to pave the way for younger siblings with similar aspirations. So while having older siblings who had experienced the college choice process was certainly not an equal substitute for having parents who had not experienced the process, it was clearly one way of familiarizing parents about the process of college decision-making and planning. The following Chicana talked about this in her response:

> I don't think they're really that familiar, but they're more familiar than other parents because they already went through [the process] with my three sisters and one brother. And so by now they have an idea of what's expected of me.

This same student, however, also talked about some of the difficulties her older brother, who was the first to go to college, experienced as he attempted to navigate through the college choice process. She mentioned the following:

> It was harder for Tony because my parents didn't know what to do. They didn't know what was required of my brother. I know it must have been frustrating for Luis to have parents who were incapable of giving him the information he needed.

Another Chicana with older siblings in college shared a similar story. She noted:

> My older brother says he was the experimental child because he's the oldest and he had to do everything by himself and he says I'm the left over because I got everything that they [older siblings] didn't get. So it [the road to college], was

> paved for me, and I thank god that I'm the youngest one because I'd probably be lost if I wasn't.

If there is a formula for successfully navigating through the stressful process of college planning and decision-making, it would undoubtedly include a supportive network of both protective and institutional agents capable of transmitting valuable college related information. Thus far, the data suggests that the Chicanas in this study were not necessarily able to tap their parents for these types of tangible resources. The inability of their parents to act as important sources of information was largely due to their lack of exposure and understanding of the collegiate experience in this country.

Not being able to access direct and insightful information about the nuts and bolts of the college choice process from parents means that Chicanas have to look elsewhere to acquire pertinent college information. For example, this Chicana talked about her high school as being the place where she was able to college information:

> She's not really familiar [mother], but everything is at school. When I had to fill out applications we had a workshop to help us fill out our applications, so that was a big help. When I told her [mother], she was happy because it was really such a blur to her.

Attaining college information within the school setting, however, may be a difficult task to accomplish for some Chicanas, given the resources and opportunities available at their school. I now shift to a discussion of the school and the resources available to these students.

The School and Institutional Agents as Sources of Information in the College Choice Process

For the majority of these Chicanas, the resources available at their school were viewed as their primary sources of college information. Research tells us that most students who plan to apply to college normally rely on high school counselors for college guidance (McDonough, 1997). Regrettably the school that these twenty Chicanas attend only has one full time college counselor. As a result, a majority of the Chicanas indicated that it was difficult for them to receive proper college guidance because there were simply too many students seeking out the efforts of the one college counselor available at their school. An interview with the college counselor of El Este High School conducted in an earlier study highlights the difficult task of being able to provide all students with the adequate amount of information and resources about college (Ceja, 1998). She mentioned:

> The school is so huge. The class is always running about 800, and unfortunately we don't have time to deal with everybody in their own little sphere in the way that would be helpful. So in November, if you want to talk about a community college it's going to be a short speech, because we're so inundated with the number of kids that we already identified [to be] eligible to go to a Cal state or a UC or a four year school, because they've done the A through F requirements. And some of those kids are not filling out applications, so we're banging the walls getting those kids to get in and basically setting the kids who don't have the A through F aside, knowing that we have a little bit more time for them because the community college application deadline is far into the future and it kind of dictates your life, that schedule, and the enormity of the number of people you are dealing with.

With a college counselor to student ratio like the one described in the above quote, it is clear that access to pertinent college information is not necessarily feasible for all students. Many of the Chicanas in this study were keenly aware of this dilemma. For example one Chicana talked about the challenges posed by the huge counselor to student ratio. She shared:

> Because there's only one counselor for like 3000 students at El Este High School, that's really hard, and not matter how much they try or how late they stay, it's

> going to be really difficult to get to all the students and make sure that they are doing everything.

The challenges of accessing college guidance from the college counselor proved to be a difficult feat for some of the Chicanas. However, as one Chicana noted, accessing college information from institutional agents like the college counselor was also difficult because of the college counselor's preference to only help certain students. This Chicana, who planned to attend a private liberal arts college, mentioned the following:

> Mrs. Counselor, the advisor, sometimes she's helpful with people that wants to be helpful to…Like people that she knows. People that go talk to her a lot. Those are the people that she tries to help. But to other people, it's like she doesn't even pay attention to [them].

The school's newspaper provided further testimony to this type of favoritism on the part of the college counselor in an article entitled, "Students Don't Feel Welcomed in College Corner." In this article, other El Este students accused the counselor being unwilling to help students with their college questions.

Another Chicana made her frustration clear when asked about the college resources that were available to her at El Este High School. In her quote, this Chicana talked about the counselor's attitude when dealing with students. This student also made suggestions on what she would hope the counselor's approach ought to be. She explained:

> You have the college corner. But many of the times the counselor isn't there to give us [information]. And if you go and ask her a question, many times she's too busy. So she tells you, "No, no, no, not right now, I'm too busy." I guess she has all these things to do. When students are trying to ask for help she should say, "Wait a second, I'll get to you right now." But she [counselor] doesn't do that.

While a number of the Chicanas felt that the college counselor wasn't as helpful as they would have hoped, there was a sense amongst the majority of the students that other resources available at the college corner office, like college brochures, scholarship books, and information about tests, were useful. For example, a Chicana who planned to enroll at one of the University of California campuses noted:

> Even though the counselor is not willing to help that much, a lot of students use that place. It's the only source of information you could really go to.

Another Chicana shared a similar sentiment. She felt that the college center was in fact useful because of the resources it offered, but didn't feel as positive about the help she received. She noted:

> It [the college center] is [useful] but not the help, not the person who runs it. We had some complaints about her [college counselor]. She doesn't help you. She's like mean. She's rude and supposedly she has all these helpers to help you, but I don't see them. They're not there.

For some Chicanas, especially those who had a well establish support network of individuals both in and out of school not being able to access the services of the college counselor did not impact the college choices that they were able to make in any negative way. These students were either part of the magnet program, where they had access to better teachers and college preparatory classes, or were actively involved in different college outreach programs (i.e. Telacu Upward Bound, CBOP, Medcore). In many cases, these outreach efforts, which are usually external to the schools, served as the primary source where students received college guidance and information. In any case, these students were exposed to a host of institutional agents in their teachers, college representatives, and college-going peers who were able to

transmit college resources and information that were often difficult to access from the college counselor. From the very beginning of their college choice process, these students envisioned a number of post-secondary opportunities, sought and received support, and were able to arrive at their final college choice with a number of options available to them.

However, the story was somewhat different for those Chicanas who were not necessarily planning to attend a highly selective institution, but rather had goals to attend the local state or community college. Often times, these students included Chicanas who didn't have other siblings already in college, and who didn't necessarily make use of the college center as much as they would have wanted to. Because these students were the first in their family to experience the college choice process, their inability to access college information and resources at their school was even more crucial in terms of shaping their decisions about college. For example, one Chicana said that not being able to talk to the college counselor about some of her post-secondary options was an important reason why she had only applied to just two local state colleges. Another Chicana who had applied to five four-year campuses talked about the possibility of attending the local community college because she wasn't able to get anyone at her high school to help her resolve all of her financial aid questions. She believed that she wasn't going to be able to afford attending any of the five colleges that she had applied for.

For some Chicanas, not being able to access the right type of information about the college opportunities available to them certainly places limitations on the types of choices they are able to create for themselves. For example, a Chicana with aspirations to graduate from a four-year school opted not to apply to college because she wasn't sure if she would be ready to enter a university. Despite meeting the requirements necessary to apply to a state university, this student decided that a community college would be the best option for her. But even after

deciding to take the community college route, this Chicana wasn't quite sure whether or not she would be able to access information about community colleges from her school. She shared:

> About community colleges, I haven't really talked to anybody. Not about community college. I think I'm going to talk to Mrs. Pina my counselor, and then maybe in the college corner. I don't know if they [college center] have [information] about community college.

The stories shared by the Chicana students in this study raise a number of important issues that are pertinent if we are to begin to understand the college choice process for these students. Clearly, the lack of familiarity with the college choice process on the part of the parents eliminates an important source of information that Chicanas can tap into. The lack of college information and resources existing within the home setting forces many Chicanas to rely solely on the schools for this type of information. However, as the interview data indicated, the school that these twenty Chicanas attended posed several challenges for them, as they attempted to inform themselves about their post-secondary opportunities. The limitations of having one college counselor to serve as an institutional agent capable of guiding and transmitting tangible college resources and information was clear from the stories shared by the Chicana students in this study.

CONCLUSIONS

This study represented an effort to add to our understanding of the college choice experience of Chicanas. By exploring parents' familiarity with the college choice process we were able to explore the extent to which these parents were able to act as information sources for the Chicanas in this study. This paper began to explore issues related to the organizational

structure of the school and the role that institutional agents such as the college counselors play in the college choice process. However, it seems that future studies must examine how other aspects of the organizational structure of the school environment (i.e. being in a college preparatory curriculum, the role of academic counselors) operate to structure the types of college opportunities envisioned by Chicanas.

Furthermore, given the limited resources available to many Chicanas who are enrolled in large urban high schools, it is also important to understand the mechanisms that Chicanas use in order to maximize the resources that are available within their school environment. Do Chicanas, for example, make use of what Solorzano and Villalpando (1998) have called "critical resistant navigational skills," in order to succeed in school, and thus allowing them to acquire the scholastic cultural capital (Cuadraz, 1992) necessary to advance in the educational pipeline? Moreover, given the challenges faced in trying to obtain college information within the school setting, do Chicanas exhibit a sense of resiliency in their efforts to expand their post-secondary opportunity? These types of studies will get us closer to understanding the complexities of the college choice process for first-generation Chicanas.

This study, as well as future studies on Chicana college choice are important for a number of reasons. The fact that Chicanas are highly underrepresented in institutions of higher education makes it pertinent that we understand the different factors that shape the college choices these students make. Second, a review of the literature suggests that one feature of college choice research is that it has exclusively been the domain of quantitative analysts (i.e. Chapman, 1981; Jackson, 1982; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989). Thus, the qualitative methodology employed by this study adds a unique dimension to the issue of college choice missing in the larger body of research on this topic.

Third, literature on college choice has focused very little attention to the way this process is experienced by specific minority groups. Since very little research exists on the college choice process of different minority students, studies like this one are also important because they take one sub-population of these students, first-generation Chicanas, and explore the many factors that are important as they navigate through the college choice process.

These new insights will provide much needed information for scholars concerned with questions of access and equity in education, particularly in a post-affirmative action era that has witnessed substantial decreases in the number of different minority groups across different institutions of higher education. Clearly, the identification of key influences, in this case the role of protective and institutional agents, can serve as a catalyst for developing school wide programmatic efforts that aim at increasing the number of Chicanas in higher education.

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